




Misbehavior or Misinterpretation?

by Carla R. Monroe

Closing the Discipline
Gap through Cultural
Synchronization

In urban classrooms,
understanding the
cultural context of the
learning environment is
key to effective classroom
discipline.



"Many African-American communities favor overlapping, animated, and emotionally textured styles of interaction."

She charged into the classroom on the first day of school and greeted her peers with a loud and animated, "Hey, my people, what's up?" Her entrance immediately triggered several knowing glances and smiles from the members of my 11th-grade language arts class.

"Hey Miss um, um . . ." she called to me. "What's this woman name anyway?" she asked no one in particular.

"Miss lady! Where you want me to sit at? What we be doin' in this class? What's yo' name again?" Her short, clipped questions and comments sprang forth like a verbal barrage. Placing her hands on her hips, she assumed a pointed expression as she awaited my response. The class began to giggle.

As I introduced myself and indicated her seat, I heard several comments murmured throughout the room.

"Ah, LaTonya's in here. It's gonna be a trip," Janae said as she shook her head.

"Oh snap. It's on now," Jerome laughed.

"She startin' the first day!" Leon observed.

If the students' initial nonverbal reactions had left any doubt, their present warnings removed any lingering uncertainty. I was experiencing many practitioners' worst fear: A "problem student" had just entered my class.

This was the scenario on the opening day of an institute designed to raise academic performance among teenagers who attended an underperforming high school in a large urban city. My specific charge: Sharpen literacy skills among the predominately African-American youths in my classes. As most educators are aware, however, educational aims always require a parallel emphasis on creating an effective learning environment, particularly with regard to classroom behavior. While the idea of addressing disciplinary issues with economically disadvantaged students of color raises concerns for many educators, practitioners can gain insights into their professional practice from scholarship on the cultural context of schooling (Banks and Banks 1995).

Carla R. Monroe, a former public school teacher, is Co-Director of the Spencer Foundation-funded study "African-American Adolescents in a Black Suburb in the U.S. South: A Social Study of Identity, Schooling, and Achievement" based at the University of Georgia. Her research areas include multicultural education and teacher education. She is a member of the Tau Tau Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi.

With a deep understanding of the cultural overlay of school discipline, both in theory and practical application, teachers can work more effectively in urban environments. A brief overview and analysis of research on disparities in school discipline is presented here, followed by practical suggestions for approaching student conduct in the classroom. Although cultural boundaries extend beyond race, the regularity of racial differences in disciplinary outcomes warrants special emphasis on the construct. Irvine's (1990) framework of cultural synchronization guides the article's interpretive lens.

Student Discipline

Teachers consistently identify student discipline as a significant professional concern (Ingersoll 2001; Ingersoll and Smith 2003; Public Agenda 2004). Indeed, constructive student conduct and attitudes are central to the creation and maintenance of a successful learning environment. Consequently, behavioral expectations, policies, procedures, and patterns in classrooms are critical means toward productive educational ends. When misbehavior is perceived as a recurrent problem, educators also may grapple with concerns such as low standardized test scores (Skiba and Rausch 2004) and difficulties in providing high-quality teaching and learning opportunities (Noguera 2003).

By many accounts, great efforts are required to improve teachers' work with African-American students (Monroe 2005a). During the past 30 years, social scientists have documented that African-American students receive office referrals and harsh punishments at significantly higher rates than European-American students (Irvine 1990; Monroe 2005a; Skiba 2001; Skiba et al. 2000). Such patterns of disproportionality—a problem referred to as the *discipline gap*—are documented in most major school districts throughout the United States (Applied Research Center 2002; Gordon, Piana, and Keleher 2000; Monroe 2006).

Ferguson (2000), Rong (1996), and others have argued that discrepancies within institutions are magnified when student gender and socioeconomic status are considered concurrently with students' ethnicity and race. Given the national prevalence of the discipline gap, educators might expect to encounter correspondingly high rates of misbehavior among African-American students in K–12 public schools. Notably, however, no compelling research studies support such an ostensibly logical relationship (Skiba 2001; Skiba and Peterson 1999). Rather, the discipline gap appears to stem from a lack of cultural synchronization in the classroom.

Cultural Synchronization

Hilliard (2002, 89) wrote, "Culture is nothing, more nor less, than the shared ways that groups of people have created to use and define their environment." These col-

lective tendencies generally include alternative behavioral norms and interpretations of personal conduct (Erickson 1993). Ethnic identity and race frequently serve as the axes on which norms diverge, particularly with regard to body language, speech, and implicit assumptions accompanying these traits (Bowers and Flinders 1990).

In some European-American communities, for instance, interpersonal communication is frequently marked by lack of affect, constraint, deference to authority in dialogue, turn-taking, and linear conversational patterns (Kochman 1981). In contrast, many African-American communities favor overlapping, animated, and emotionally textured styles of interaction (Hale 1982; 2001). Furthermore, authentic expression is typically accompanied by physical expression, varying vocal qualities, and frankness of expression. Such variations may be reified by social class differences (Heath 1983).

Because middle-class and European-American professionals hold most K–12 teaching posts (Gomez 1996; National Center for Education Statistics 1997), classroom behavioral policies and expectations tend to reflect culturally specific perspectives (Brown 2005; Monroe 2005b). For example, explicit classroom rules often penalize self-directed movement and limit opportunities for student talk (Everhart 1983). Implicit rules also frequently undergird conventions concerning respect, cooperation, vocal usage, interpersonal space, and deference to teacher authority. Unfortunately, in many ways, limited diversity in the teaching corps has precluded educators from appreciating the socially derived nature of "effective" learning environments and, more specifically, issues related to student discipline (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran 2004).

The cultural backgrounds of low-income students of color often differ significantly from the institutional norms of the school (Ferguson 2000; Obidah and Teel 2001). As a consequence, the actions of such youths often are misinterpreted and penalized by school officials. Consider the following examples:

- Gilbert and Gay (1989) researched and documented the importance of stage-setting behaviors—such as changing postures, sharpening pencils, and taking stock of learning materials—in the academic success of African-American students. Yet, teachers frequently perceived such actions as procrastination and off-task behavior.
- Weinstein and her colleagues (2004) reported problems encountered by a novice European-American teacher who assumed that a spirited verbal interaction between two African-American boys was aggressive behavior. In actuality, the boys were engaged in a culturally based linguistic exchange. Documented forms of discourse among African

Americans include call and response, signification, and ritualized insults (Foster 1986; Majors and Billson 1992; Smitherman 1977).

As these examples suggest, developing teachers' sense of cross-cultural competency is crucial for promoting student success and closing the discipline gap.

Irvine (1990) argued that teachers may enhance African-American students' schooling experiences by establishing patterns of cultural synchronization in the classroom. To this end, practitioners should promote symmetry between school and home by incorporating elements of students' lived realities in the classroom. Examples include literature written by authors who share the students' backgrounds, academic assignments that draw on referents such as cultural traditions and artifacts, and valuing multiple ways of learning, knowing, and understanding (Irvine 2003).

By reflecting on students' culture in the classroom, teachers create familiar environments that celebrate, rather than penalize, students' heritage. Specific to discipline, teachers are encouraged to approach their classes authoritatively, use direct speech, incorporate community-based humor as a classroom-management tool, and make implicit expectations explicit (Monroe and Obidah 2004).

Classroom Strategies

Because disciplinary moments largely arise between teachers and students at the classroom level, practitioners' perceptions and responses are central to closing the discipline gap. Several strategies designed to guide teachers' thinking about student behavior are suggested here. Although offered in the context of redressing disproportionality among African Americans, the techniques presented create conditions for improved educational experiences among all students.

Teachers: Understand yourselves as cultural beings.

Practitioners must enter their classrooms with a sound grasp of how their own socialization, experiences, values, and perceptions shape who they are as professionals. Equipped with strong insights about connections between culture and behavior, teachers can better appreciate the ways in which behavior is socially defined, acquired, and varies across groups. Such knowledge provides an important basis for recognizing and remedying systematic disciplinary trends among African-American youths.

Behavior, for students and teachers, is both learned and adaptable. To elicit the best responses from their students, teachers are encouraged to modify their own behaviors and avoid sanctioning culturally based actions that are not intended to be disruptive. Tools for aiding teachers' development in these areas include the Johari Window (a model describing human interaction), BaFa BaFa (a cross-cultural simulation game), and initiatives offered by Project Implicit (a virtual laboratory for the social and behavioral sciences). Moreover,

teachers can gain new insights into intercultural dynamics through professional development workshops where they are given opportunities to debrief their experiences (McAllister 2002).

Establish strong relationships with parents and other student caregivers. Effective teachers are not satisfied with deficit explanations of students' home lives (Ladson-Billings 1994). Instead, the best teachers for African-American students make concerted efforts to build relationships with parents and families, and view them as allies in promoting student success.

These teachers integrate themselves into students' communities through visits to youths' homes, religious centers, and community organizations. They also maintain written and oral communication by making use of technological opportunities to interact with parents, including a class Listserv, bulletin board, and e-mail. These approaches not only engage parents' assistance in reinforcing classroom expectations but, more importantly, also create opportunities to draw on parents' knowledge of what works best for their children.

Apply culturally responsive discipline. Although educational literature is replete with material that addresses classroom discipline, little scholarship recognizes the value of drawing on patterns found in students' cultural communities. Investigations designed to identify specific classroom-based practices reveal that teachers engage in banter-filled dialogues as well as deliver firm comments and lectures to convey their behavioral expectations and mold student behavior (Irvine 2003; Irvine and Fraser 1998; Monroe and Obidah 2004). Communicative approaches may include switching between standard-English and African-American dialect, and mirroring community-based verbiage, cadence, facial expressions, conversation topics, and demeanor.

Although some may posit that European American teachers have a difficult time adapting their practice to Black norms, a number of seminal studies provide evidence that European Americans who make deliberate efforts to understand and mirror Black cultural styles do so success-

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fully (Ballenger 1992, 1999; Ladson-Billings 1994). Unfortunately, culturally specific disciplinary techniques frequently are overlooked in most K–12 environments or are stigmatized as inappropriate behavior. To close the discipline gap, teachers must broaden their vision of effective disciplinary practices to include culturally based strategies.

Assume multiple roles in students' lives. Both historical and contemporary studies of African-American educational excellence confirm that good teachers establish multifaceted relationships with their students (Foster 1997). Strong disciplinarians consciously cultivate relationships with their charges outside of the classroom. They participate in extracurricular activities, serve as surrogate parents and family friends, and open their classrooms for community-based gatherings (Mitchell 1998; Monroe and Obidah 2004).

In their totality, such interactions invite strong interpersonal bonds with students, increased understanding of youths' cultural orientation, and trusting relationships with families and communities. These interactions also provide teachers with insights into young people's abilities and interests, as well as knowledge about circumstances and influences that can elicit positive responses. Characterized in this fashion, interactions between students and teachers become a powerful overlay for desirable behavior by developing cohesive, interdependent communities grounded in respect, care, and mutual goals.

Concluding Thoughts

Clearly, every case of classroom disruption is not attributable to cultural misunderstandings. Yet, the regularity of the discipline gap compels educators to seek out additional explanations for racial disparities—particularly given the inaccuracy and lack of support for deficit-based arguments. A closer look at the lack of cultural synchronization between teachers and students may reveal that many disciplinary sanctions emanate from misinterpretations of student behavior.

Well-meaning educators too often enter urban classrooms with a limited professional vision. Many teachers possess an inadequate understanding of how their own cultural experiences shape who they are as teachers and may encourage patterns of school failure for students. Educators must extend their thinking beyond traditional approaches to classroom discipline. They must develop competencies related to the cultural context of their learning environment if they wish to become truly effective teachers for culturally diverse students. ■

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